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A ‘delirium tremens’: Italian-Language Film Versions and Early Dubbings by Paramount, MGM and Fox (1930–33)

Carla Mereu Keating

Abstract

This contribution sheds new light on the strategies that Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Fox developed in the early 1930s to target the Italian-speaking market. It documents how the Italian government, local film traders and the press responded to the majors’ Italian-language production during a critical turning point for the national film industry. The chapter draws on a range of historical records (diplomatic, censorship and administrative state documents, film prints, press reviews and other publicity materials) from Italian and North-American archives. The findings show that the majors’ experiments with Italian dubbing and versioning were not always successful and elicited ambivalent responses in Italy; the findings also witness the gradual emergence of dubbing as the most commercially viable solution for both the US majors and the Italian establishment. Incongruities in the archival records, and the scarcity of surviving film prints, pose interpretative problems and call for further empirical research in the field.

Keywords

Film translation, archival research, Italian-language versions, dubbing, Paramount, MGM, Fox

A much-debated subject in the national film press of the 1930s and 1940s,¹ the transition to dubbing in Italy has had long-term consequences for the distribution, exhibition and reception of American films in Italy which remain understudied. The film historian Mario Quargnolo was the first to compile a detailed historical overview of the early dubbing industry in Italy.² Historical analyses of the characteristics of the Italian language in intertitled and dubbed films were also published between the 1970s and the early 2000s by the linguist and historian Sergio Raffaelli.³ These pioneering studies have become the main points of reference for subsequent film and translation scholarship on the transition to sound in Italy. There is a tendency, however, to rely uncritically on these secondary accounts without questioning their sources.⁴ Thanks to the increased availability of digital resources and improved access to archival data, the present study offers an evidence-based investigation of the transition to dubbing in Italy and aims to verify and expand upon existing knowledge of the period.

During the conversion to sound, Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and Fox supplied the Italian market with a variety of silent, sound and talking films. The production of Italian-talking films abroad coincided with plans made by Italian film traders, in particular by Stefano Pittaluga (at the time Italy's most important film producer and distributor), to invest in the new sound technology and to produce and exhibit sound and talking films in Italy; an ambitious industrial enterprise which after years of financial struggles had finally won the active support of Mussolini's administration.⁵ Data from Italian censorship, diplomatic and

¹ See Carla Mereu Keating, *The Politics of Dubbing: Film Censorship and State Intervention in the Translation of Foreign Cinema in Fascist Italy* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 109–51.

² See Mario Quargnolo, 'Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano', *Bianco e Nero*, 5 (1967), 67–79, later expanded in the oft-quoted monograph *La parola ripudiata. L'incredibile storia dei film stranieri in Italia nei primi anni del sonoro* (Gemona, La Cineteca del Friuli, 1986).

³ Raffaelli's bibliography on the subject is very extensive. See in particular *La lingua filmata. Didascalie e dialoghi nel cinema italiano* (Florence, Le Lettere, 1992).

⁴ Stefania Carpić's systematic research on Italian press sources published in *Le ombre cantano e parlano. Il passaggio dal muto al sonoro nel cinema italiano attraverso i periodici d'epoca (1927–1932)* (Dublin, Artdigiland, 2012) is a welcome exception.

⁵ On the state involvement in the *rinascita* (rebirth) of the Italian film industry, see in particular Riccardo Redi, *Ti parlerò... d'amor. Cinema italiano fra muto e sonoro* (Turin, RAI-ERI, 1986) and Daniela Manetti, 'Un'arma poderosissima': *Industria cinematografica e Stato durante il fascismo, 1922–1943* (Milan, Franco Angeli, 2012). On the pioneering work of Stefano Pittaluga, see also Marina Nicoli, "L'Ollivud semo noi". La Società

administrative state archives will help contextualise the ban notoriously implemented by the Italian film censorship office, at the time based at the Ministry of the Interior, to ‘silence’ foreign-language films.⁶ In the absence of original prints, research on the Italian press will help identify the earliest examples of Italian dubbing produced abroad. Paramount’s Italian-language production in Joinville and its reception in Italy will also be evaluated through the pages of the Italian and American trade press. Correspondence between Paramount and the Italian embassy in Washington will shed light on the research carried out by Paramount to realise the potential represented by the Italian-speaking market at home and abroad. MGM’s and Fox’s experiments with Italian versions and dubbing in Los Angeles coincided with Paramount’s ambitious venture in Joinville. The fact that different strategies were implemented at the same time by different studios prevents me from offering a straightforwardly chronological account of the situation. Diplomatic records are useful to contextualise the tentative beginnings of MGM’s and Fox’s Italian work and the reactions of the Italian government to this foreign competition. MGM’s plans and output will be observed through the lens of the American and the Italian press. As for Fox, my recent discovery of two nitrate prints containing two early Italian dubbings will provide concrete evidence of the ‘hybridity’ of these Italian film translations. Finally, state legislation and press commentaries will help us understand why dubbing prevailed and why its relocation to Rome was welcomed by both the Italian government and the American majors.

Restrictions to foreign-language film exhibition

Anonima Stefano Pittaluga tra scelte imprenditoriali e pressioni politiche, 1919–1935’, *Imprese e Storia*, 41–2 (2011), pp. 319–65.

⁶ The terms often used by Italian scholars to describe this operation are *film sonorizzati* (films with added sound), where the emphasis is on the music and sounds which were added or maintained, and *pellicole ammutolite* (silenced films). For the use of *sonorizzazione* see e.g. Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, p. 21; for silencing as *ammutolimento* see e.g. Raffaelli, *La lingua filmata*, pp. 191–2.

The start of the production of Italian-language talkies in France and in the United States in the early 1930s coincided with a series of Italian government initiatives in support of the national film industry. The state's financial involvement, which aimed to reverse a long-term decline in domestic film and theatre production, came in response to renewed pressure from film producers and exhibitors during the late 1920s, in particular from the Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Industriali dello Spettacolo (Fascist National Federation of the Performing Arts). In November 1930, the Ministry of Corporations sent a draft to Mussolini for a decree allocating economic aid to the film industry for the period 1930–31. This provisional scheme, approved by the government in February 1931, is important to the present analysis because, among other things, it aimed to 'incite national producers, and potentially foreign producers, to make films in Italy' and to 'prevent ... the screening in Italian cinemas of films which contain scenes spoken in a foreign language ...'.⁷

However, the decision to ban the use of foreign languages in films pre-dates the official regulation: the very first authorisation by the film censorship office which carried the condition according to which any scene spoken in a foreign language had to be deleted date back to November 1929.⁸ According to existing censorship records available on the Italia Taglia database, between November 1929 and August 1933 over 400 *nulla osta* for imported films imposed this condition.⁹

The ban forced Italian cinemas to screen talking films in a silenced version: dialogue was muted and replaced by Italian intertitles. Soon after the ban started being implemented, Nicola

⁷ Archivio Centrale di Stato (ACS), Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM), 1928–30, b. 3.1-7, f. 372.4426, sf. 4, 'Costituzione Ente Rinascita Cinematografia Italiana' ('*incitare le ditte nazionali, e eventualmente, quelle straniere, a produrre in Italia*' '*impedire ... la rappresentazione, nella sale del Regno, di pellicole che comprendano scene parlate in lingua straniera ...*'). English translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.

⁸ '*Togliere la parte parlata in lingua straniera*' was the earliest indication (Italia Taglia, no. 25360). From January 1930 onwards the condition regularly read: '*Togliere ogni scena dialogata o comunque parlata in lingua straniera*'.

⁹ Italia Taglia is the film censorship database of the General Directorate for Cinema of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. The database contains primary information on the work of the state-run film censorship office from 1913 to 2000 (<http://www.italiataglia.it/bancadati>).

de Pirro, at the time general secretary of the Federazione dello Spettacolo (and who had initially accepted and justified the decision to silence foreign-language talkies),¹⁰ complained that this solution was exacerbating the already precarious situation of domestic film exhibition.¹¹ In the monthly film trade paper *Lo spettacolo italiano* De Pirro requested that the film office allow the temporary screening of films consisting mostly of songs and music and containing only sporadic dialogue, in order not to penalise exhibitors 'with restrictive measures of excessive rigour.'¹² Even though the regulation of 1931 ultimately allowed the reproduction of foreign songs in films,¹³ the paper's subsequent attempts to challenge the film office's ideological standpoint were ignored.¹⁴

Whereas throughout 1929 the US majors were already supplying their home market mostly with sound and talking films, in Italy the American subsidiaries were still circulating silent films. Aware that Italian exhibitors were gradually adjusting to sound and talking films, the majors planned to provide the Italian market with silent product during the upcoming 1930–31 season too.¹⁵ Domestic cinemas were gradually wired for sound in the first half of the 1930s.¹⁶ During these transition years, the silencing of talking films had probably been regarded as a temporary solution, as the public was already accustomed to watching intertitled silent films. But the intertitling of silenced dialogues could not last long, given the increasing popularity of sound and talking films, the progressive technological improvements in recorded sound, the resulting narrative complexity of film dialogue, and the gradual conversion to sound of Italian cinemas. From late 1930 onwards an uncertain climate of

¹⁰ See 'La Censura cinematografica e il mercato delle pellicole in Italia', *Lo spettacolo italiano* (October 1930), 222–3.

¹¹ Nicola De Pirro, 'Censura e film sonoro', *Lo spettacolo italiano* (February 1930), 31–2.

¹² De Pirro, 'Censura e film sonoro', 31 ('con misure restrittive di eccessivo rigore').

¹³ See article 10, act 198 of June 1931.

¹⁴ 'La Censura cinematografica e il mercato delle pellicole in Italia', 222–3; and 'I films parlati e la propaganda italiana all'estero (a proposito della censura italiana)', *Lo spettacolo italiano* (March 1931), 101–2.

¹⁵ See for example *Bollettino Fox* (1 September 1929), 8.

¹⁶ Lorenzo Quaglietti, 'Il cinema degli anni Trenta in Italia: primi elementi per un'analisi politico-strutturale', *Materiali sul cinema italiano. 1929–1943* (Pesaro, Quaderni informativi della Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, 1974), pp. 289–331; Luigi Freddi, *Il Cinema: Il governo dell'immagine* (Rome, CSC-Gremese editore, 1994), p. 117.

nationalist hostility mixed with widespread anticipation of the new sound and talking films saw the gradual release of the first Italian-language features in Italy's largest urban cinemas.

Early examples of Italian dubbing

Three films containing dialogue dubbed in Italian were shown in Milan in April 1930, according to film reviews published in Alessandro Blasetti's *Cinematografo* in May 1930 and in the influential Milanese newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.¹⁷ *La notte è nostra* (The night is ours) was dubbed (only the first and the last scenes, according to Quargnolo) from *La nuit est à nous*, the French-language version of *Die Nacht gehört uns* (Carl Froelich, 1929).¹⁸ *Miss Europa* (Miss Europe) (*Prix de beauté*, Augusto Genina, 1930), which premiered at the cinema Odeon in April 1930, was entirely dubbed in Italian.¹⁹ *Luce di gloria* (Light of glory) (*Molly and me*, Albert Ray, 1929) produced by the New York independent company Tiffany-Stahl Productions, was shown dubbed at the San Carlo.²⁰

According to Quargnolo, a few spoken scenes of Fox's *Maritati a Hollywood* (*Married in Hollywood*, Marcel Silver, 1929)²¹ had previously been dubbed in Italian in Hollywood on the initiative of Louis Loeffler, film editor and director working at Fox.²² This, however, is not confirmed by any of the historical records that I have consulted so far. The censorship record tells us that the film was registered in Italy in March 1931 under the condition that any scene spoken in a foreign language was deleted.²³ While the foreign-language ban arguably does not

¹⁷ Umberto Masetti, 'Redazione milanese', *Cinematografo* (6 May 1930), 48; 'Rassegna cinematografica', *Corriere della Sera* (15 April 1930), 15.

¹⁸ According to the censorship record, any foreign language spoken in the film had to be silenced. Italia Taglia, No. 25640.

¹⁹ Italia Taglia, no. 25661. For further information on *Prix de beauté* (the silent, the sound and the four synchronised versions in French, English, German and Italian), see Davide Pozzi, 'Prix de beauté: un titolo, due edizioni, quattro versioni', in Anna Antonini (ed.), *Il film e i suoi multipli/Film and its multiples* (Udine, Forum, 2003), pp. 67–78 and Malte Hagener, 'Prix de beauté as a Multiple Intersection. National Cinema, Auteurism and the Coming of Sound', in Nataša Ďurovičová (ed.), *Multiple and Multiple-language Versions/Versions multiples* (Udine, Forum, 2004), pp. 102–15.

²⁰ Italia Taglia, No. 25653.

²¹ When no English back translation is given, the Italian title is equivalent to the original title.

²² Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, p. 41.

²³ Italia Taglia, no. 25619.

exclude that the film was partially dubbed in Italian, Umberto Masetti's review in *Cinematografo* does, as it suggests that the copy of *Maritati a Hollywood* shown at the San Carlo was a *sonoro* (sound film without dialogue) whereas the other above-mentioned titles (*La notte è nostra*, *Miss Europa*, *Luce di gloria*) were described as *sonoro* and *parlante* (or *parlato*) (talking or spoken film). According to Masetti, the screening of *La notte è nostra* at the Corso in Milan was not successful: 'The rhythm [of the film was] slow, the acting artificial, the intertitles implausible and the dialogue insufficient.'²⁴ Masetti's review of *Luce di gloria* was also not particularly positive, but the film's 'Italian dialogue [was] well synchronised, despite being overemphatic.'²⁵ *Miss Europa*'s opening at the Odeon fared better: according to Masetti, Genina's film was 'excellent,' and 'the Italian dialogue adapted in the most cinematographic way,' even though it did not completely persuade the audience.²⁶ *Corriere della Sera* also published a largely positive review of *Miss Europa*, praising the quality of its synchronisation, which, according to the reviewer, was far more accurate than that of *La notte è nostra*.²⁷

Although Italian reviewers seem to have been moderately pleased with these early dubbing experiments, it is not known whether these films circulated in the rest of Italy and how they were received by the public.²⁸ Little is also known about the technical and translational characteristics of these dubbings or about the cast who performed them.²⁹

While it is interesting to observe that these early experiments with dubbing were produced in different locations (Los Angeles, Berlin, Paris and presumably New York) and by a variety of companies, in the following pages I will focus on the contribution to this developing

²⁴ Masetti, 'Redazione milanese', 48 ('... ritmo lento ... recitazione artificiosa. Didascalie incredibili. Dialogo insufficiente.').

²⁵ Masetti, 'Redazione milanese', 48 ('... dialogo italiano ben adattato, sincronicamente, ma troppo enfatico.').

²⁶ Masetti, 'Redazione milanese', 48 ('Ottimo film di Genina cui è stato adattato il dialogo italiano nel modo più cinematografico. ... Pubblico diviso e contrasti alle prime.').

²⁷ 'Rassegna cinematografica', *Corriere della Sera* (15 April 1930), 15.

²⁸ According to Redi, *Ti parlerò ... d'amore*, p. 105, *Miss Europa* did not circulate in Rome until 1932.

²⁹ On the method used to synchronise the foreign-language editions of *Prix de Beauté* see Jean-François Cornu, *Le doublage et le sous-titrage. Histoire et esthétique* (Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014), p. 102.

translation branch of the film industry by three major film companies, Paramount, MGM and Fox, whose evolving plans and output paved the way for the predominant mode of translation and circulation of foreign-language films in Italy and in Europe in the years to come.

Made-in-Joinville: Paramount's Italian-language production

The Italian-speaking market

On 10 June 1930 Paramount's foreign division in New York contacted the Italian embassy in Washington to enquire about the possibility of obtaining figures for Italian nationals residing in the United States, and to ask for an estimate of the number of Italian speakers in major American cities, whether or not of Italian nationality. The Italian embassy agreed to provide such information as it would be useful 'to turn the American film into a weapon of secondary, but not negligible, importance for the diffusion of our language among Italians and Italian-Americans.'³⁰ The figures given to Paramount's foreign division on 18 August 1930 estimated the total number of Italian speakers residing in the US at 1,377,000.³¹ However, the Italian Ambassador Giacomo de Martino, specified:

It is very difficult to obtain exact statistical data on the subject, one must consider that many people who immigrated to Italy in their childhood or were born here, are practically unfamiliar with the Italian language. On the other hand I believe that there are a considerable number of Americans who study and know Italian and who, I am

³⁰ Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAE), Affari Politici, USA, 1931–45, b. 5, f. 12, sf. 88/13, 'L'Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930–1' ('*in modo da cercare di fare della pellicola cinematografica americana un'arma di secondaria, ma non trascurabile importanza, della diffusione della nostra lingua fra gli italiani ed italo-americani*').

³¹ The figures were as follows: New York City 900,000; Newark, NJ 95,000; New Haven, Connecticut 65,000; Paterson, NJ 35,000; Rochester, NY 35,000; Utica, NY 30,000; Syracuse, NY 25,000; Bridgeport, Connecticut 24,000; Waterbury, Connecticut 22,000; Hartford, Connecticut 18,000; Yonkers, NY 15,000; San Francisco 60,000; Los Angeles, California 18,000; Stockton, California 15,000; Sacramento, California 10,000; S. Jose, California 10,000.

sure, would be deeply interested in listening to Italian ‘talkies’, which would be for them a very good linguistic exercise.³²

I shall return to this point to discuss how De Martino’s optimistic outlook would not be shared by the Italian authorities in Rome and by the General Consul in New York, who both liaised with his office in Washington in October and December 1930.

According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) census of 21 April 1931, the Italian population in the early 1930s was about 41 million people. With over a million people of Italian origin also residing in the US (and many others in South America), Paramount could reach a vast Italian-language market.

During 1930 Paramount had been reconverting the film complex in Joinville, previously owned by the Cinéromans film production company, into six sound studios: as of June 1930, two studios were fully functioning and two larger ones were about to be completed.³³ By the end of September all the studios were working to full capacity.³⁴ In Joinville, Paramount could benefit from the ready availability of good European actors, directors, technicians and dialogue writers. Output initially consisted of multiple-language versions of English-language films that Paramount had shot at its studios in Hollywood and Astoria (New York), and which had already been released in the US. Many film productions were based on literary works or stage plays; other films were originally conceived and produced in Joinville.³⁵ Only seven features were produced in Italian in Joinville. Except for the last Italian feature, which was an

³² Originally in English. MAE, ‘L’Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930–1’.

³³ ‘Paris Studios On 24-Hour Basis to Supply Needs’, *The Film Daily* (25 June 1930), 8.

³⁴ ‘Record Made by Kane in Joinville Studios’, *International Photographer* (November 1930), 26.

³⁵ According to Harry Waldman’s calculations, 300 or so films (feature, medium and short-length) spoken in French, Spanish, German, Swedish, Italian, Polish, Czech, Portuguese, Hungarian, Dutch and Romanian (listed according to their numerical presence), were released from 1930 to 1933. Harry Waldman, *Paramount in Paris: 300 Films Produced at the Joinville Studios, 1930–33, with Credits and Biographies* (Lanham, Md., Scarecrow Press, 1998), pp. ix, x.

original Joinville production, the other films were all remakes of English-language films. Three of these films were also released in the United States.³⁶

The Italian-language versions

During the summer of 1930 the Italian press gave extensive publicity to, and seemed to genuinely nurture great expectations for, Paramount's Italian production. A double issue of *Cinematografo* announces the start of these activities, reporting a visit to Joinville by the Italian Ambassador to France, Count Gaetano Manzoni, by the main members of the Italian unit (managed by Americo Aboaf) and by the Italian press on 28 May 1930.³⁷ A longer editorial entirely dedicated to Paramount's first Italian talkie, *Perchè no?* (Why not?), follows. A passage reads: 'Only a couple of weeks have passed since the start of shooting, but the harmony of the artists, the enthusiasm that animates them and the meticulous preparation will see the film completed in a very short time ... the cast [is] truly admirable ... they all have that clear, precise and mellow diction which makes our melodious language so beautiful.'³⁸

Perchè no? was the Italian-language version of *The Lady Lies* (Hobart Henley, 1929). It was directed by Italian silent film director Amleto Palermi and scripted by Camillo Antona³⁹ and starred home-grown silent film actors such as Maria Jacobini and Livio Pavanelli.⁴⁰ The film was completed in June 1930 and its *nulla osta* was registered in Italy on 30 September 1930, so the film was presumably shown in domestic cinemas close to that date.⁴¹

³⁶ Paramount had also planned to release silent and sound films in the Italian market. See adverts for the 1930–1 season in *Kines* (15 June 1930), 12.

³⁷ 'Servizio di turno', *Cinematografo* (May-June 1930), 11–2.

³⁸ 'Il primo film italiano della Paramount', *Cinematografo* (May-June 1930), 39 ('... s'è iniziato da appena un paio di settimane, ma l'affiatamento degli artisti, l'entusiasmo che li anima e la preparazione minuziosa fanno sì che il film sarà completato in brevissimo tempo ... il complesso artistico, veramente ammirevole ... tutti possiedono la dizione, chiara, precisa, suadente che fa più bella la nostra armoniosa lingua.').

³⁹ Waldman, *Paramount in Paris*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Further information on the Italian actors who worked for Paramount in 1930 and 1931 can be found in AMATI (Archivio multimediale degli attori italiani), online database developed by the University of Florence which documents the life and work of Italian film and stage actors.

⁴¹ Italia Taglia, no. 25994. The *nulla osta* of all films scrutinised by the film commissions were registered in a batch at the end of each month. See Sergio Raffaelli, 'Sulla data del visto di censura', *Immagine*, 9 (1988), 17–8. *Perchè no?* circulated in Italy at the same time as *Sei tu l'amore?* (Are you love?) (Alfredo Sabato, 1930), an

Paramount's news bulletin in the trade journal *Il Cinema Italiano* on 10 June 1930 presented *Perchè no?* in enthusiastic terms: 'It was beyond expectations. The elegance of the mise-en-scène, the mark of true Italianness in the action, together with acting worthy of every praise, make the film an authentic work of art which will not fail to arouse the interest it deserves in the coming season.'⁴² The film was also reviewed by *Film Daily* in September 1930 a few days after its New York premiere at the 55th St. Playhouse: according to the reviewer, it was competently acted and directed, 'packing the Italian audiences in at every performance, and they received it with marked enthusiasm. As the first Italian talkie, it is an event to people of that nationality and should go big wherever there is an Italian population to cater to.'⁴³

Once the film reached domestic screens, however, the reviews were not so positive. In October 1930, Umberto Masetti reviewed screenings of *Perchè no?* in Milan: '... slavish retelling of the same story [as the original American film] in our language with our actors. No attempt was made to connect with our sensibilities. It may be of interest for its role in showing the active possibilities and the mistakes of the talking film. Contrasting [audience reaction]'.⁴⁴

News soon also came to Italy of the start of the second feature-length production *Il segreto del dottore*, the Italian version of the English-language film *The Doctor's Secret* (William C. de Mille, 1929). Again scripted by Antona Traversi, *Il segreto del dottore* was the first talking

Italian-talking feature produced by Italtone, an independent Italian-American film company based in Los Angeles. It also circulated alongside Cines-Pittaluga's talking feature *La canzone dell'amore* (The love song) (Gennaro Righelli, 1930).

⁴² Passage quoted in Italian in S. Carpiceci, *Le ombre cantano e parlano*, p. 147 ('Alla visione è risultato superiore a ogni aspettativa. L'eleganza della messinscena e l'impronta di vera italianità impressa all'azione, insieme all'interpretazione che è degna d'ogni elogio, fanno del film un autentico lavoro d'arte che non mancherà di suscitare nella prossima stagione l'interesse che merita.').

⁴³ 'Why not? (*Perchè no?*)', *Film Daily* (28 September 1930), 11. Italtone's *Sei tu l'amore?* opened in New York at the 8th Street Playhouse later than *Perchè no?* on 14 November 1930, but premiered in San Francisco earlier on 16 August 1930.

⁴⁴ 'Rivista agli schermi', *Cinematografo* (October 1930), 47 ('*Pedissequo riporto dello stesso soggetto in nostra lingua con attori nostri. È mancato il lavoro di riferimento alla nostra sensibilità. Tuttavia interessa per il rilievo che offre di possibilità attive e di errori del film parlante. Contrasti.*').

film of Soava Gallone, the Polish silent film diva who was married to filmmaker Carmine Gallone. The director was Jack Salvatori, an Irish-Italian born in Rome who emigrated to the US in the early 1920s, where he worked as an actor and assistant director. Salvatori was also asked to direct *Il richiamo del cuore* (The heart's call), the Italian-language version of *Sarah and Son* (Dorothy Arzner, 1930), scripted and dialogued in Italian by Oreste Biancoli, a playwright who was to become a successful screenwriter.⁴⁵

Writing in *Cinematografo* in December 1930, Blasetti judged *Il richiamo* the best film so far among those produced in Joinville. It was, however, still a result deserving little praise because of Paramount's disdain for the work of Italian cameramen, set designers, directors and technicians; the Italian actors, the only elements considered necessary by Paramount, were forced to adapt to an American format and to work under Paramount technicians; all this with much more limited time and budget at their disposal than those accorded to the English-language version.⁴⁶

Other film reviewers were similarly unimpressed by Paramount's Italian work. On 14 December 1930 Guglielmo Giannini, director of *Kines*, harshly criticised the major's decision to offer the inexperienced Salvatori the direction of its most recent Italian production ('in the past it was more difficult to become a concierge, even if one knew English') and complained about the bad acting ('those [actors] that we liked – or better to say, those that we disliked less'). Giannini tore the whole film apart, calling *Il richiamo* a 'bad, boring film lacking interest. ... we are really sorry for our dear friends Aboaf and Paramount, but one just cannot say otherwise. ... dialogue is absurd, the adaptation and the screenplay worthy of a beginner. ... There's no denying it: we are in full *delirium tremens*.'⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Both *Il segreto* and *Il richiamo* were registered in Italy on 30 November 1930. Italia Taglia, no. 26108; no. 26134.

⁴⁶ 'Servizio di turno', *Cinematografo* (December 1930), 3. Not all Paramount technicians were American; in fact, sound technicians were mostly German. See Cornu, *Le doublage et le sous-titrage*, p. 153.

⁴⁷ Guglielmo Giannini, 'Prime visioni', *Kines* (14 December 1930), 3 ('Una volta, pur parlando l'inglese, era più difficile diventare portiere d'albergo' 'Quelli che più ci sono piaciuti – e meglio sarebbe dire meno

During the second half of 1930 the Italian unit in Joinville was firing on all cylinders. In August 1930 the shooting of *La donna bianca* (The white woman), the Italian version of *The Letter* (Jean de Limur, 1929) was almost finished, while the production of the Italian version of *Dangerous Paradise* (William Wellman, 1930), entitled *La riva dei bruti* (The shore of the brutes), was about to start.⁴⁸ Emerging Italian actors such as Carmen Boni, Enrico Signorini and Romano Calò were called to feature in the all-star *Paramount Revue*. Once again, as soon as these films were shown in Italy, the press did not spare their negative reviews.⁴⁹

In October 1930 *Cinema Illustrazione* reported on the shooting of *La vacanza del diavolo*, the Italian-language version of *The Devil's Holiday* (Edmund Goulding, 1930).⁵⁰ Its premiere at the cinema Barberini in Rome was reviewed on 5 April 1931 by *Kines*: the reviewer considered it one of the best Italian-language features from Paramount, but still not satisfactory because of the deficiencies inherited from the English-language film and because of the 'childish' dialogue written by the inexperienced Dino Falconi. Furthermore, Salvatori's direction was weak and the actors appeared 'terrified' by the microphones.⁵¹ *La vacanza del diavolo* had opened in New York in March 1931. *Variety*'s reviewer was not very generous: 'While the story, when it escapes from the terrible mugging of the Italian cast, is still human and appealing, it becomes here just average film fare. ... Paramount will have to do better than this if wanting [*sic*] homemade versions to build up European trade, even despite the shortage of local product in Italy.'⁵²

dispiaciuti' '... cattivo film noioso e privo di interesse ... Ci dispiace per i cari amici Aboaf e per la Paramount, ma non si può non dirlo ... Il dialogo è assurdo, la riduzione e la sceneggiatura degna di un principiante ... Non c'è che dire: siamo in pieno delirium tremens.')

⁴⁸ Both films were registered in Italy on 31 January 1931. Italia Taglia, no. 26257; no. 26272.

⁴⁹ See for example 'Prime visioni', *Kines* (22 February 1931), 3 and Enrico Roma, 'I nuovi film', *Cinema Illustrazione* (22 July 1931), 12.

⁵⁰ 'Chiacchiere di studio', *Cinema Illustrazione* (8 October 1930), 4. The film was registered in Italy on 28 February 1931. Italia Taglia, no. 26290.

⁵¹ 'Prime visioni', *Kines* (5 April 1931), 3 ('... esso rappresenta quanto di meglio la Paramount ci abbia inviato da Joinville, ma non per questo si deve pensare che si tratta di un film accettabile... ha svariati difetti d'origine... la direzione artistica ... si rivela debole e inesperta ... Il dialogo è puerile e rivela solo l'esperienza di palcoscenico. ... E gli attori tutti sembrano terrorizzati dalla presenza del microfono.').

⁵² 'La Vacanza del Diavolo (Devil's Holiday)', *Variety* (25 March 1931), 71.

The direction of *Canzone del mondo* (Song of the world),⁵³ Paramount's last Italian feature produced in Joinville, was assigned to French silent filmmaker Charles de Rochefort. Enrico Roma accorded it another cold reception:

Joinville. Enough said. Only two days of screenings and hissing resounded. ... When Italian is spoken in our cinemas, it does not take long to unleash a storm (excluding the Pittaluga [company], which does things properly here). And it is understandable. How can you allow a foreign *régisseeur* [director] to judge our actors' diction? I bet that, for de Rochefort, [Silvio] Orsini is a great Italian actor, whereas his marked Neapolitan accent (at times certainly comical) and his declamatory emphasis will make him a good element for the Compagnia Scarpetta.⁵⁴

As convincingly discussed by Ginette Vincendeau, the failure of Paramount's multiple-language project goes beyond economic and industrial factors and raises theoretical and ideological questions important for the exploration of the new relation of spectator to film and of emerging notions of national cinema.⁵⁵ In the Italian case, the generic storylines which made no reference to Italian cultural specificity or national 'spirit,' the audience sensitivity to the novelty of dialogue and the lack of experience in acting and directing (e.g., the actors' non-standard diction, their overemphatic acting and their awkwardness in front of the

⁵³ The film was registered by the Italian censorship office on 31 May 1931. The censorship authorisation also indicates an alternative title under which the film was released, *Televisione* (Television). Italia Taglia, No. 26534. See Roberto Chiti and Enrico Lancia (eds.), *Dizionario del cinema italiano. I Film. Vol. 1: Tutti il film italiani dal 1930 al 1944* (Rome, Gremese editore, 2005), p. 359.

⁵⁴ 'I nuovi film', *Cinema Illustrazione* (9 September 1931), 12 ('Joinville. È detto tutto. Due soli giorni di programmazione e fischi sonori ... Quando, nei nostri cinema, si parli italiano, la tempesta non tarda a scatenarsi (la Pittaluga a parte, che da questo lato fa le cose sul serio). E si capisce. Come volete che un *regisseur* straniero possa giudicare la dizione di nostri attori? Scommetto che per il Rochefort, l'Orsini è un ottimo attore italiano, mentre il suo spiccato accento napoletano (in certi momenti decisamente comico) e la sua enfasi declamatoria, ne farebbero un buon elemento per la Compagnia Scarpetta ...'). The Compagnia Scarpetta was a theatre company founded by Eduardo Scarpetta in Naples in 1880 famous for their Neapolitan comedies.

⁵⁵ Ginette Vincendeau, 'Hollywood Babel', in Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (eds.), *Film Europe and Film America. Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939* (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 207-24.

camera/microphone) all came into play at a time of increasing competition and caused the failure of the Italian-language production in Joinville. In the following pages, archival findings will reveal how dubbing succeeded in reinstating what Paramount failed to achieve in Joinville: the delicate balance between industrial standardisation (to guarantee profitability) and cultural differentiation (to satisfy the renewal of demand).⁵⁶

Paramount's Italian dubbing

By July 1932 Paramount Joinville had stopped its multi-language production and had shifted its operations to dubbing.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Italian press coverage of the subject is scant and sheds little light on the Studios' transition from versioning to dubbing. Very limited information is available on which films were dubbed in Italian in Joinville. According to Quargnolo, Paramount's Italian dubbing unit was headed by Baron Saint Just, and the dubbed versions were directed by Pier Luigi Melani,⁵⁸ but it is unclear what Quargnolo's source was. Quargnolo also states that Paramount started to dub films in Italian in late 1931 and continued for a few months during 1932.⁵⁹ However, it is likely that the dubbing unit was set up before the production of Italian versions was discontinued.

One of the first mentions of dubbing at Joinville is a short article published in *Kines* in December 1930, entitled 'La Paramount doppierebbe i suoi film?' (Will Paramount dub its films?). It seems to have been unconfirmed at that point whether Paramount was indeed going to resort to dubbing 'to solve more practically the problem of the talking film'.⁶⁰ The French word *doublure* [stand-in], and not *doppiaggio*, is the term chosen at that time by the anonymous Italian critic. In January 1931, *Kines* confirmed that it was not just a rumour: 'At

⁵⁶ See Vincendeau, 'Hollywood Babel', p. 212.

⁵⁷ Vincendeau, 'Hollywood Babel', p. 214. Waldman dates this complete conversion to 1933 (Waldman, *Paramount in Paris*, p. xii).

⁵⁸ Quargnolo, 'Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano', 71.

⁵⁹ Quargnolo, 'Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano', 71.

⁶⁰ 'La Paramount doppierebbe i suoi film?', *Kines*, (21 December 1930), 5 ('... per risolvere più praticamente il problema del film parlante...').

Paramount Joinville they are preparing the synchronisation in Italian of the film *À mi-chemin du ciel* under the direction of Mr. Karrol [sic].⁶¹ *À mi-chemin du ciel* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1931) was the French-language version of the American film *Half-way to Heaven* (George Abbott, 1929); the film was authorised in Italy with the title *Bella del circo* (Beauty of the circus) in June 1931.⁶² *Bella del circo* may well be the first or one of the very first films Paramount dubbed in Italian in Joinville. Interestingly, Paramount used the French-language version as the source text, rather than the American original, much as MGM did at the same time (and cf. the case of *La notte è nostra* produced in Berlin several months earlier). As Romance languages, Spanish and French perhaps offered an easier basis for the post-synchronisation of the dialogue into Italian than the English language did. Also, Mediterranean-looking Hispanic and French actors may have appeared more familiar than their North-American colleagues to Italian audiences, who would then in turn be more prone to accept the initial awkwardness documented by many critics in relation to dubbed films.

Other films dubbed in Italian by Paramount which Quargnolo lists include *Il dottor Jekyll* (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Rouben Mamoulian, 1932) and *Il segno della croce* (*The Sign of the Cross*, Cecil B. de Mille, 1932).⁶³ The dubbing of these major productions starring Fredric March, re-voiced respectively by Italian actors Olinto Cristina and Franco Schirato, may suggest that by late 1932 Paramount had definitely dropped the production of Italian-language versions in favour of dubbing in order to profit from the box-office popularity of their stars.

Made-in-California: MGM's and Fox's Italian production

A shaky start

⁶¹ 'Calendario', *Kines* (18 January 1931), 7 ('Alla Paramount di Joinville stanno curando la sincronizzazione in italiano del film *A mi-chemin du ciel*, sotto la direzione di Mr. Karrol.') Jacob (or Jakob) Karol was a German at the time heading the dubbing department at Paramount Joinville. See Cornu, *Le doublage et le sous-titrage*, pp. 151–4.

⁶² Italia Taglia, no. 26546. The title was changed to *Via del cielo* (Heaven's way) in September of the same year.

⁶³ Registered in Italy respectively on 31 October 1932 and 30 June 1933. Italia Taglia, no. 27418; no. 27796.

Diplomatic documents exchanged in summer and winter 1930 between the Italian vice-consulate of Los Angeles and the Ministry of Corporations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) in Rome offer a useful starting point for understanding the production of Italian-language films in Culver City and Hollywood by MGM and Fox. They also highlight the reactions of Mussolini's government to the majors' 'Italian' activities.

Of particular relevance is a report dated 31 July 1930, sent by the vice-consul in Los Angeles, Mellini Ponce de Leon, to the Roman offices of MAE,⁶⁴ where issues concerning Italian film production in Los Angeles are addressed at length. According to this report, by 1929 the majors were not planning to produce films in Italian because they were aware of the Fascist government's intention to boost domestic production to the exclusion of foreign films. They also considered the Italian market a small one in comparison to other European markets, which is why other main languages (French, Spanish and German) were given priority and production in Italian was initially put on hold. When it finally started, the majors' Italian work seems to have been disorganised and of poor quality.

The first example given by the vice-consul is the Italian-language version of MGM's *Men of the North* (Hal Roach, 1930) entitled *Luigi la Volpe* or *Monsieur La Volpe*.⁶⁵ The vice-consul had been informed that *Luigi la Volpe* was very disappointing: not only had the Italian actors been picked hastily, but the script translation was so inaccurate that 'the film may not even go into circulation.'⁶⁶ The translation was first entrusted to the Italian cast member Marino Bello, originally from Trieste, 'quick but lacking any cultural knowledge' and later to Francesco Maran, a former non-commissioned officer of the Austrian Army and *irredento*.⁶⁷ According to Umberto Masetti, who reviewed one of the film's first screenings at the Cinema

⁶⁴ MAE, 'L'Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930-1'.

⁶⁵ *Men of the North* also had Spanish, French and German versions.

⁶⁶ MAE, 'L'Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930-1'. Even so, *Luigi la Volpe* was authorised for distribution in Italy on 31 October 1930. Italia Taglia, no. 26071.

⁶⁷ MAE, 'L'Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930-1'. An *Irredento* was someone from areas ethnically linked to Italy but that were still under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the third War of Independence (1866).

San Carlo for *Cinematografo*, the actors spoke ‘with an unbelievable English accent. The dialogue is at times so naïve that it makes spectators grumble. They would have kept quiet if they had had to read rather than listen.’⁶⁸ *Corriere della Sera* published another mixed review in December 1930: ‘... how can one claim that all actors in *Luigi la Volpe* actually speak Italian? How can it be claimed, when the actors persist in pronouncing “Sargente” instead of “Sergente”, or the chaste young girl instead of telling her sweetheart “mettetemi alla prova” [put me to the test] addresses him (unfortunately) with a “provatemi” [experience me]? That being said, the drama holds together ... also thanks to the presence of Franco Corsaro,’ who was, nonetheless, urged to improve his diction.⁶⁹

As reported by the vice-consul, in early July 1930 Fox had also announced its intention of opening an Italian unit. Alberto Guglielmi Valentino (brother of Rudolph) was chosen to direct the unit: ‘Former Royal commissioner, with a degree in law, devoted to Italy and to Fascism, can do well.’ Louis Loeffler was chosen to direct film production: ‘He seems to have important contacts in the film industry and with the people in charge,’ Ponce de Leon added.⁷⁰

Finally, the vice-consul requested the advice of the Fascist offices on how his office should act with regard to some initiatives launched to support Italian film production in Los Angeles, including a possible cooperation of the majors with the Camera di Commercio Italiana and the newly-born Associazione Italiana del Cinema. The Italian government’s response, which arrived almost three months later on 20 October 1930, reveals how the Italian government

⁶⁸ ‘Rivista agli schermi’, *Cinematografo* (December 1930), 35 (‘*Recitazione con accento incredibilmente inglese. Dialogo talvolta così ingenuo da far mormorare gli spettatori, che avrebbero taciuto se invece di sentire avessero letto.*’).

⁶⁹ ‘Rassegna Cinematografica’, *Corriere della Sera* (10 December 1930), 2 (‘... come sostenere che tutti gli attori di *Luigi la volpe* parlano proprio italiano? Come sostenerlo almeno finché si ostineranno a pronunciare “Sargente” invece di “Sergente”, e la casta fanciulla, per dire al giovane del suo cuore “mettetemi alla prova” gli dirà, (sciagurata!) “Provatemi”? Questa riserva fatta diremo che il dramma si regge ... e per la presenza di Franco Corsaro, che ci pare un attore ben piantato, al quale varrebbe forse la pena di far imparare un po’ di dizione ...’).

⁷⁰ MAE, ‘L’Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930–1. Quargnolo identifies Valentino as the translator, Loeffler as the unit director and actor Franco (Frank) Puglia as dubbing director (see Quargnolo, ‘Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano’, 71).

intended carefully to discourage these Italian-American and American initiatives without explicitly hindering them. The document also pinpoints the economic and political reasons behind the Italian government's wary attitude to US-based competitors, whether American or of Italian origin. First of all, there was a need to protect the burgeoning State-funded industry from this serious and damaging foreign competition. Secondly, Italian-American initiatives could not be supported because of the remarkable economic, moral, cultural, artistic and especially linguistic influence that such talking films could have at home and abroad within the Italian-speaking communities of North and South America. Contrary to what was said by Italian ambassador De Martino in Washington, Rome underlined the negative cultural, linguistic and moral propaganda about Italian language and traditions that could arise from these foreign-based productions, revealing that since the second half of 1930 Mussolini's government had had the strong intention to incite, even oblige the Americans to relocate their Italian-language production to Italy.⁷¹

MGM's interest in dubbing

According to Quargnolo, MGM started to dub films into Italian in early 1931 in its Culver City studios. Carlo Boeuf, an Italian emigré, directed the unit.⁷² Scripts were translated and adapted by Giovanni Del Lungo, who was then joined by Maria Carolina Antinori, expressly recruited from Italy.⁷³

It is likely that MGM was planning to dub films into Italian and other foreign languages earlier than 1931. After the American press reported Metro's intention to move its foreign-language production (versioning) to Europe,⁷⁴ the major seemed to have retreated from this plan, concentrating on dubbing instead, which would allow it to cash in on its stars'

⁷¹ MAE, 'L'Italia e la lingua italiana nel cinematografo americano 1930-1'.

⁷² Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, p. 42.

⁷³ Giovanni del Lungo was the son of Dante scholar Isidoro del Lungo. Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, p. 42. I have found no information so far on Maria Carolina Antinori.

⁷⁴ See 'Par. and Metro May Do Foreign Versions Abroad', *Variety* (5 March 1930), 7.

established popularity.⁷⁵ This was, according to a *Variety* commentator, MGM's renewed position in relation to dubbing in mid-1930, after the company had overcome initial 'worries' due to the 'imperfect' results of early synchronisation experiments:⁷⁶

New plans for dubbing will entail the reshooting of close-ups in these pictures [referring to Metro's *Our Blushing Brides*, *The Girl Said No* and *His Glorious Night*].⁷⁷ Idea is to have the players learn their lines in their foreign tongue and recite them while being photographed silent in these shots. This is to eliminate a lack of synchronisation with the lip movement in the spot where it would be the most noticeable. Long and medium shots will be tricked so that at no time will the lip movement be discernible. If this becomes general practice, which is probable, many of the players recently imported for foreign versions will be heard but not seen.⁷⁸

At the time of writing, little information has been found in either the Italian or American press in relation to the development of MGM's dubbing methods or its Italian unit. According to Quargnolo, the cast featured voice actors such as Francesca Braggiotti, Argentina Ferraù, Augusto Galli and Rosina Fiorini-Galli.⁷⁹ MGM's Italian dubbing unit also included Francesco Maran (whom the Los Angeles vice-consul listed for Fox instead).⁸⁰ By early 1932, however, Metro was short of Italian actors, and was sending, as a last resort, the director of

⁷⁵ On Metro's advertising strategies in Italy between 1922 and 1938, see Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il ruggito del Leone. Hollywood alla conquista dell'impero dei sogni nell'Italia di Mussolini* (Venice, Marsilio, 2013).

⁷⁶ 'Cos. Concerned on Export Prints', *Variety* (6 November 1929), 4.

⁷⁷ According to the Italia Taglia database, these films were registered in Italy respectively on 31 August 1931, no. 26739 (in a silenced version), on 31 March 1931, no. 26377, and on 31 January 1932, no. 27019.

⁷⁸ 'Dubbing's Comeback on Coast; Sounds Men Assured Results as Desired', *Variety* (6 August 1930), 4.

⁷⁹ Quargnolo, 'Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano', 70. For biographical information on Braggiotti see Gerardo Di Cola, *Le voci del tempo perduto. La storia del doppiaggio e dei suoi interpreti dal 1927 al 1970* (Chieti, éDICOLA, 2007), pp. 257–8.

⁸⁰ It is more likely that Quargnolo is correct here, considering that the writer/actor appears in the credits of MGM's *Monsieur le Fox*. Or perhaps Maran worked for one company before moving to the other.

the Italian unit Carlo Boeuf to scout for talent in New York, home to a large Italian-speaking population.⁸¹

On 31 March 1931, the Italian censorship office registered *Chi non cerca trova* (Those who do not seek will find),⁸² the Italian version of *Free and Easy* (Edward Sedgwick, 1930) the talking debut of the silent star Buster Keaton. Keaton also acted in Spanish and in Italian for the respective versions, with the rest of the cast being dubbed. According to Raul Quattrocchi, reviewing the premiere at the Cinema Corso for *Kines* on 12 April 1931, *Chi non cerca trova* was ‘spoken, that is, dubbed in Italian with great diligence.’ Keaton’s poor command of Italian initially caused some embarrassment in the audience: ‘A greater efficacy in the verbal delivery and purity in the diction would have been more desirable.’⁸³

According to Quargnolo, the first MGM film dubbed into Italian was *Carcere* (Jail), adapted from *El Presidio*, the Spanish version of *The Big House* (George Hill, 1930), a big success of the time.⁸⁴ However, it is more likely that MGM had dubbed other films in Italian before *Carcere* (see below). *Carcere* was, nonetheless, the first to achieve popular success: according to the review of *Corriere della Sera*, *Carcere* was the best dubbed film that the Americans had sent to Italy to date.⁸⁵ Two *Kines* reviewers writing in June 1931 were of the same opinion: the sound recording was beautiful and the verbal performance ‘diligently dubbed in Italian;’⁸⁶ surely ‘the best Italian version made so far in America.’⁸⁷ Another early example is *Sivigliana* (Sevillian), dubbed from *Sevilla de mis amores* (Ramón Novarro, 1930), the Spanish version of *Call of the Flesh* (Charles Brabin, 1930). *Sivigliana* was registered in

⁸¹ ‘Last Italian Look’, *Variety* (2 February 1932), 11.

⁸² Italia Taglia, no. 26412.

⁸³ ‘Prime visioni’, *Kines* (12 April 1931), 4 (‘*Il film è parlato, cioè doppiato in italiano con molta diligenza. ... Sarebbe certo stata desiderabile una maggiore efficacia nella recitazione e una maggiore purezza nella dizione*’).

⁸⁴ Registered in Italy on 30 April 1931. Italia Taglia, no. 26441.

⁸⁵ ‘*Carcere*’, *Corriere della Sera* (19 April 1931), 5.

⁸⁶ ‘Prime visioni’, *Kines* (14 June 1931), 4 (‘*la parte vocale è stata diligentemente doppiata*’).

⁸⁷ ‘Bilancio della stagione 1930-31’, *Kines* (21 June 1931), 13 (‘*la migliore versione italiana realizzata finora in America*’).

Italy on 31 July 1931, though it did not open until 16 October at the Corso and Moderno cinemas in Rome.⁸⁸

Whereas Paramount resorted to dubbing for the Italian market only after the failure of the Joinville versions, MGM was one of the first majors to be convinced of the efficacy of the dubbing method. By 1932, the company had abandoned its plans to produce versions in Europe and was concentrating on dubbing. It was importing French, German and Italian actors to Hollywood and was selecting films to be dubbed in each foreign language, depending on the film's 'hoped-for adaptability' to the language/market involved.⁸⁹

Fox's Italian production in Hollywood

Fox produced one Italian-language version and several dubbed versions in 1931 and 1932. *Il grande sentiero* was the Italian-language version of *The Big Trail* (Raoul Walsh, 1930), directed by Louis Loeffler and featuring Franco Corsaro, Luisa Caselotti and other Italian-American actors.⁹⁰ Although *Kines* dedicated the cover of its 15 February 1931 issue to the film, a reviewer in the March issue did not appear particularly impressed, concluding that 'there's too much talking, and in vain' and dialogues 'are unnecessarily tacked on.'⁹¹

Between late 1930 and 1931 Fox also experimented with dubbing. During research in the UCLA film and television archive in Spring 2015 I identified two 35mm nitrate prints of two early Italian dubbings made by Fox between 1930 and 1931: *Rinascita* (*The Man Who Came Back*, Raoul Walsh, 1931), a long-winded drama starring popular duo Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell,⁹² and *Transatlantico*, the Italian-dubbed version of *Transatlantic* (William K.

⁸⁸ Italia Taglia, no. 26627.

⁸⁹ 'Deal with Each Market as Unit', *Variety* (10 May 1932), 15.

⁹⁰ Registered in Italy on 28 February 1931. Italia Taglia, no. 26344. According to *Film Daily*, the Italian version was shot in just 13 days. 'Fast shooting', *Film Daily* (28 December 1930), 4.

⁹¹ 'Prime visioni', *Kines* (29 March 1931), 3 ('*si parla troppo in questo film, e troppo inutilmente ... il dialogo vi fa la figura di una inutile appiccicatura.*').

⁹² The film was originally released in the USA in January 1931, and obtained the *nulla osta* in Italy in July of the same year. Italia Taglia, no. 26651.

Howard, 1931), authorised in Italy in January 1932 under the silencing ban.⁹³ The following observations are based on the study of the digitised copies of the two nitrate prints which I viewed onsite at the archive. At the time of writing, I have not been able to find the exact production date of these dubbings, nor any information related to the identity and activities of the cast who worked on it.

Rinascita's dialogue scenes are generally framed in medium, medium long and long shots, with close-ups mostly avoided during spoken exchanges. These directing and editing decisions must have helped to avoid some of the problems associated with lip-synching actors in close-ups.⁹⁴ Here are some examples from Gaynor's speech. In this scene, Gaynor's character Angie meets Stephen (Farrell) in an opium den in Shanghai, but pretends to be a girl called Gloria: 'Beh, ora che mi *sai, mescimi* da bere' (translating the English 'Well, now that you've met me, how about the drink?') where *sai* is used in place of the grammatically correct *conosci/hai conosciuto*, and *mescimi* is a misused literary term which could be replaced by *servimi/versami*; 'Ti ho voluto *provare*', instead of *Ti ho voluto mettere alla prova*, mistranslates the original line 'I wanted to test you out'. Greetings and other terms of address are often left in English: *hallo* is used to answer the telephone; *hi!* is used to greet the bartender and *goodbye* to dismiss Stephen's snob aunt; *alright* is kept as such in the Italian version, and so are *hey* and *mister*.⁹⁵

Further examples of the linguistic make-up of this early dubbing are found when looking at one affectionate conversation between Stephen and Angie in San Francisco, framed in an alternating series of medium and medium long shots. In Stephen's passionate lines,⁹⁶ *Che?*

⁹³ The censors also requested the deletion of the scene of the banker's false attempted suicide. Italia Taglia, no. 27005.

⁹⁴ The effects on the style of Hollywood movies deriving from the adoption of dubbing (e.g., the choices in framing and cutting) are discussed in Charles O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the United States* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005). See also Charles O'Brien's chapter in this volume.

⁹⁵ I have yet to verify if the English words were recorded again by the dubbing actors or if they were leftovers from the original soundtrack.

⁹⁶ English and Italian dialogues can be found in Table 1.

literally translates *What?* instead of the correct interrogative pronoun (*Che*) *cosa?*. The demonstrative *Quello che* in the expression *Quello che io faccio* is inaccurately used instead of the indefinite pronoun *Qualunque cosa*. *Promettilo* and *ti prometto* should include the pronominal particles as in *promettimelo* and *te lo prometto*. Angie's *Sei tu certo* repeats the personal pronoun *tu* unnecessarily; Stephen's reply *Son più che certo* is left without the pronominal particle as in *ne son più che certo*. Because of these phono-morphological inaccuracies, the Italian version frequently lacks fluency; on the other hand, it is also true that in several other scenes of this heavily-dialogued film the Italian speech is adapted carefully.

A review of *Rinascita*'s opening night at the Odeon in Milan appeared in *Kines* on 18 October 1931: '... as the posters declare with great pomp, this is the first film entirely spoken in Italian... but we know what this talking comes to: it is the method currently in fashion, called "dubbing" or "doublage". ... Critics – for the most part – have commented on this method and the invention has not been welcomed.'⁹⁷ Despite the example given by *Carcere*, which achieved 'exceptional results close to perfection,' Huele remarked, the critics considered dubbing 'an aesthetic absurdity', 'a butchering.'⁹⁸ For him, this method must remain the exception, to be resorted to only in specific cases. Achille Valdata also reviewed *Rinascita* for *Kines* on 8 November 1931. The film, which was then showing at the Cinepalazzo in Turin, was 'a disappointment:' a 'dark, hefty, sometimes vulgar drama' with 'dubbing being surely among its biggest flaws.'⁹⁹

Transatlantico offers further problems of accent, grammar and idiomaticity. It opens with the title card '*riproduzione vocale eseguita da attori italiani, accuratamente scelti*' (vocal reproduction executed by carefully chosen Italian actors), actors whose identity is not

⁹⁷ Giuseppe Huele, 'Polemica sul dubbing', *Kines* (18 October 1931), 10 ('... come dicono pomposamente i manifesti, è il primo film parlato interamente italiano Si sa ormai a che cosa si riduce questo parlato: è il procedimento, attualmente in voga, detto del "dubbing" o "doublage". ... la critica, per la maggior parte, ha rilevato questo procedimento e l'invenzione non è stata ben accolta. ...').

⁹⁸ G. Huele, 'Polemica sul dubbing', 10 ('... ottimi risultati che toccan quasi la perfezione. ... esteticamente un assurdo ... uno scempio').

⁹⁹ 'Prime visioni in Italia', *Kines* (8 November 1931), 2 ('... una delusione Il dramma è cupo, massiccio, talvolta volgare difetti ... il minore dei quali non è certo il dubbing.')

revealed. The attempts to synch lip movements as closely as possible produce generally poor results. However, considering that there are very few instances of actors talking in close-ups, and that dialogue exchanges are most often recorded in medium and medium long shots, the negative aesthetic impact of asynchronous re-voicing is largely minimised. As in *Rinascita*, accents and diction vary significantly: some dubbers voicing main roles (characters such as Monty Greer, the gambler, interpreted by Edmund Lowe, and Sigrid Carlene, the dancer, interpreted by Greta Nissen) are native speakers of Italian but the majority of the cast have a marked American accent. Voice acting and performance are often exaggerated and overemphatic. The translation of the dialogue shows similar mixed results. The dialogue is accurate and idiomatic at some points, inaccurate, unnatural or calqued on English expression at others. Lexical choices from a more formal register often appear during informal exchanges.

An illustrative example of this co-existence of standard and non-standard Italian, colloquial and formal registers, and of Italian and American accents, is found in an initial dialogue between Monty and Handsome (played by Earle Foxe) during which we are made aware of the characters' rivalry. The two actors, dubbed respectively with a slight Roman accent and an American accent, stand by the door, framed for most of the scene in a low-angle medium shot. The dub contains (see Table 2) English words (*hello*), non-naturalised first names (instead of 'Italianised' names, as would later become common practice), and many translation calques, probably influenced by the attempts to respect lip-synchronism (*L'hai fatta carina* [You made it nice] instead of, for example, *Sei stato bravo* [You did well]; *Certo?* [Certain?] rather than *Sicuro?* [Sure?]; followed by *sicuro* in place of the more accurate *certo* two lines later), the ungrammatical '*sempre che vorrai*' (meaning 'anytime you wish'). Although largely grammatically correct and logical, the dialogue is often interspersed with expressions such as '*il mio grosso bicchiere di ottima birra*' [my large glass of excellent beer] where the adjectives follow an unusual word order due to the syntactic calque of the English phrase; or

‘*uno dei miei favoriti autori*’ a double calque from the English ‘one of my favourite authors’ (rather than ‘*uno dei miei autori preferiti*’); the title *Mister* is never replaced by the Italian counterpart ‘*signor/e*’.

In both films, translation calques and imprecisions can be ascribed to the lack of linguistic preparation on the part of inexperienced, untrained translators/adapters and voice actors. Fox’s early Italian dubbings such as *Rinascita* and *Transatlantico* are examples of a newly-developed and complex film translation technique which required different specialisations (e.g., written translation, dialogue adaptation, voice directing and acting, synchronisation, sound recording). Many of the above problems were probably due to lack of experience in dealing with qualitative synchronism or phonetic synchrony (concerning the articulatory movements of the lips and mouth, such as respecting open vowels, bilabial consonants) and quantitative synchronism or isochrony (i.e., each dubbed utterance has to last as long as the original utterance through having roughly the same amount of syllables and pace).¹⁰⁰

Because of their ‘hybridity’, these films drew criticism from some in the Italian press and by government representatives: not enough attention was paid to language adequacy when choosing Italian actors with a strong regional accent, or when hiring Italian-American actors who spoke a regional dialect but had difficulties with speaking ‘*l’italiano, quello vero*’ (proper or standard Italian), as highlighted by Goffredo Alessandrini in an interview published in Italy during the 1970s,¹⁰¹ and as initially pointed out by De Martino in his letter to the Paramount representatives of August 1930.

It is unclear why the Italian film office would ask for the deletion of foreign-language dialogue in *Transatlantico* considering that the copy I watched is entirely spoken in Italian (if

¹⁰⁰ See types of synchronisation in Candace Whitman-Linsen, *Through the Dubbing Glass* (Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1992), p. 28 and Frederic Chaume, *Audiovisual Translation: Dubbing* (Oxford, Routledge, 2014), p. 69.

¹⁰¹ Goffredo Alessandrini, an Italian screenwriter and film director, was hired by MGM in 1932 for a few months to replace Boeuf before the unit was relocated to Rome. See Francesco Savio, *Cinecittà anni Trenta: parlano 116 protagonisti del secondo cinema italiano (1930–1943)* (Rome, Bulzoni, 1979), pp. 15–6.

we exclude the occurrence of the occasional Anglicism). Several other examples reveal archival incongruities and complicate research even further. One of them is the film *Ripudiata* (*East Lynne*, Frank Lloyd, 1931), another early dubbed version made by Fox in Hollywood. In October 1931 Fox advertised its Italian release in *Lo spettacolo italiano* as a ‘film perfect in direction, acting and diction.’¹⁰² According to *Kines*’ reviewer Bat, who attended a private preview of the film on 4 October 1931: ‘The film is dubbed One can hear and see that. But as the story develops the awareness fades away, and the only thing that one wants is to know, to live, to suffer together with the languishing souls Art beats mechanics!’¹⁰³ If the film was positively reviewed by two different papers, why had *Ripudiata* been authorised in Italy in September 1931 on condition that any dialogue or scene spoken in a foreign language was deleted?¹⁰⁴ Fox’s *Un americano alla corte di Re Artù* (*A Connecticut Yankee*, David Butler, 1931) was likewise advertised as an all-Italian talker in the press¹⁰⁵ but was also registered by the Italian office on 30 November 1931 under the silencing ban.¹⁰⁶ A further example is provided by MGM’s Technicolor drama *L’isola misteriosa* based upon Jules Verne’s classic novel (*The Mysterious Island*, Lucien Hubbard, 1929) and advertised by *Kines* in November 1930 as a film dialogued in Italian.¹⁰⁷

If we are to believe that these films were dubbed in Italian, such examples raise a series of questions which remain unanswered for now: what justified the censors’ request to silence the foreign language in the film? Were these Italian-dubbed versions considered not well-executed enough to be circulated across Italy? Were these films also authorised in a silenced version to appear in the exhibition circuit yet to be equipped with sound technology? If they

¹⁰² *Lo spettacolo italiano* (October 1931), 356 (‘un film perfetto per direzione, recitazione e dizione.’).

¹⁰³ ‘*Ripudiata*’, *Kines* (4 October 1931), 5 (‘Il film è doppiato ... Si sente. Si vede. Ma appena il dramma si incatena, non si avvede più nulla, non si vuol altro che sapere, vivere, soffrire in comunione con le anime doloranti L’arte supera la meccanica!’).

¹⁰⁴ Italia Taglia, no. 26806.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Ripresa autunnale: panorama della stagione cinematografica 1931-1932’, *Kines* (20 September 1931), 2.

¹⁰⁶ Italia Taglia, no. 26883.

¹⁰⁷ *Kines* (23 November 1930), 15. Registered on 30 September 1930 on condition that all dialogues and scenes spoken in a foreign language were deleted. Italia Taglia, no. 25998.

also appeared in a silenced version, why there is no mention of this in the press and/or archival documents?

The move to Rome: the majors switch to an all-dubbed programme (1932–3)

On 16 September 1931, a long report sent by the Federazione dello Spettacolo to the Italian Ministry of Corporations lamented the exceptionally disadvantageous situation of the Italian theatrical exhibition sector, listing the drop in box-office sales, the unsuccessful addition of variety shows, revues and operettas and the closing down of 350 cinemas in the course of the previous four months. The exhibitors again requested the modification of the government's current ban on foreign-language films.¹⁰⁸ However, the ban was not lifted and subtitled films, described by the Federazione as 'international versions',¹⁰⁹ were never allowed circulation in the national theatrical circuit.

From December 1931, dubbed versions of foreign-language films (mostly German and French) started to be made at the Cines studios, the International Acoustic and other dubbing studios in Rome. They opened to mixed reviews.¹¹⁰ At the same time, MGM and Fox were planning to relocate their dubbing units to Italy. MGM inaugurated its own studios in via Maria Cristina in Rome in April 1933;¹¹¹ Fox set up a dubbing unit in the Fono Roma studios in July 1933 using the Western Electric sound recording system.¹¹² Thus, the Americans were ready to start their operations in Rome by the time the government 'nationalised' this burgeoning industry with decree 1414 of 5 October 1933 entitled 'Provvidenze a favore dell'industria cinematografica nazionale' (Provisions in favour of the national film industry). The majors may have anticipated the Italians' move, also because a similar relocation had

¹⁰⁸ ACS, PCM, 1931–1933, b. 18.2-1410, f. 6410, sf. E.2148, 'Esercizio cinematografico'.

¹⁰⁹ ACS, PCM, 1931–1933, b. 18.2-1410, f. 6410, sf. E.2148, 'Esercizio cinematografico'.

¹¹⁰ See for example 'Incursioni sullo schermo', *Kines* (28 December 1931), 2 and 'Rassegna cinematografica', *Corriere della Sera* (27 September 1932), 5.

¹¹¹ 'Dove e come i film stranieri vengono tradotti', *Eco del Cinema* (April 1933), 18–9.

¹¹² 'Fox Will Dub Foreign Versions in Italy, Spain', *Motion Pictures Herald* (22 July 1933), 18.

already been demanded by Germany and France on 1st and 21 July 1932 respectively.¹¹³ In addition, if one considers the difficulty that MGM (and presumably also Fox) was having in finding good Italian voice actors in the USA, the relocation of their dubbing units to Rome must have come as inevitable.

Together with giving further incentives to domestic production, the 1933 decree¹¹⁴ specifically addressed the theatrical mode of reproduction for foreign-language films in Italy. In particular, article 1 forbade the projection of non-national sound films of more than 1,000 metres in length ‘whose supplementary adaptation in the Italian language – dubbing or post-synchronisation – has been carried out abroad.’¹¹⁵ Article 2 specified that foreign sound films could be shown in domestic cinemas if the supplementary adaptation had been carried out in Italian studios (para. a) and if the totality of the artistic and executive staff employed to undertake such adaptation was of Italian nationality (para. b). Article 5 added a fee or tax of 25,000 Italian lire to be paid by the distributor for each foreign-language film dubbed and authorised by the censorship office and allocated these taxes to a special fund of the revenue budget. While aiding the recovery of the exhibition sector, the dubbing tax also guaranteed access to state funding to Italian producers, who often also acted as local distributors of foreign films. The burgeoning of several dubbing studios in Rome, finally, created new opportunities for employment for local actors, directors and technicians.

The transition to dubbing: present and future avenues of research

Archival research has so far highlighted that Paramount was the first American major to produce Italian-language versions; their initiative was initially welcomed in Italy because of the novelty factor and because it employed home-grown actors. However, when it became

¹¹³ See Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–34* (London, BFI, 1985), p. 212, and Cornu, *Le doublage et le sous-titrage*, pp. 55–6.

¹¹⁴ Converted to act 320 in March 1934.

¹¹⁵ Decree 1414/1933 (‘...il cui adattamento supplementare in lingua italiana – doppiaggio o post-sincronizzazione – sia stato eseguito all'estero.’).

clear that these versions were not worth the trouble, Paramount gradually converted to dubbing. MGM favoured the idea of dubbing while concurrently experimenting with multilingual versions. Even if dubbing itself was generally disliked as a film translation method, press research shows that examples such as *Carcere* were appreciated by domestic reviewers more than the multiple-language versions. Fox started Italian-language production a few months later than MGM with the colossal *La grande giornata*, but was also concurrently experimenting with dubbing. Italian press reviews and film prints show that early Fox dubbed versions presented noticeable American and regional Italian accents, as well as frequent mistranslations.

Subtitling could not solve the film translation quandary because of the ban of November 1929. After several months of delirious experimentation and aware of the increasing domestic competition, the majors must have realised that dubbing was the wisest commercial option for the Italian market: improved dubbed versions guaranteed profitability (they successfully sold the Hollywood dream at a much cheaper production cost compared to the versions); they also satisfied target demands in terms of language standards and local industry needs. The relocation to Rome was at some point necessary as the majors had to find a wider selection of trained voices to act in a variety of roles. It was more convenient for the Americans to outsource the responsibilities of dubbing to the newly opened Italian facilities than to relocate to the US the many Italian-speaking professionals needed to carry out the job (script translators, dialogue adapters, dubbing directors, voice actors). In so doing, they also satisfied the demands of domestic employment and pleased those in Italy who demanded language purity and standardisation. Finally, local dubbing would be responsive to the censorship requirements of an increasingly protectionist market.

The transition from silenced to dubbed cinema in Italy is a difficult period to research mainly because of the lack of primary sources such as film prints and production and

distribution documents. In order to understand how these films were received in Italy, scholars resort mostly to press collections, from popular magazines and newspapers to specialised trade papers. Together with diplomatic and administrative state documents, these holdings help us to document how powerful institutions such as the government, the film industry and the press received these American-Italian talkers under the Fascist regime. Despite their large influence and reach, however, these bodies only represented part of the educated urban spectatorship. Very few records, in fact, indicate how the urban and rural public responded to these films. Ongoing research is needed to address film translation agency and reception, and to engage with the methodological questions which have emerged at intervals in the examination of conflicting historical data.

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